

# 50 Years of Diplomatic Relations between Israel and Germany (2015)

## Abstract

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Reflecting upon half a century of relations between the Federal Republic and the state of Israel, a journalist describes the long and difficult road towards a post-Holocaust reconciliation between Germans and Jews.

## Source

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### The Long Road to Reconciliation: 50 Years of Diplomatic Relations Between Israel and Germany

Germany and Israel established diplomatic relations in 1965 and have traversed a good deal of territory in the meantime. Anyone arriving at the German ambassador to Israel's reception on the Day of German Unity will find standing room scarce. For many business leaders here, Germany is now the second-most important partner after the US in politics, economics, the sciences and technology. There are now more than 100 sister cities and regional partnerships as well as very close cultural and social ties. In 2015, Germany was one of the most popular vacation destinations for Israelis, along with Italy. More than 20,000 Israelis currently live in Berlin. The German capital has become part of the Israeli diaspora. When the state was founded in 1948, and the Knesset decided that no German should be permitted to travel to Israel and no Israeli to Germany, this would have been hard to imagine. Until 1956, the new passports, of which the citizens of the young state were so proud, contained the stipulation: "Valid for all countries of the world with the exception of Germany." People wanted nothing to do with the country responsible for the Holocaust.

*The Reparations Agreement* Against the background of international political developments and a series of bilateral agreements, however, Israeli national interests, German moral politics and realpolitik ultimately led to a rapprochement. The foundation for this was the "Reparations Agreement" signed in Luxembourg in September 1952 by Israeli Prime Minister David Ben Gurion and German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer (CDU). The two heads of state had asserted themselves against massive resistance in their respective cabinets, parliaments and population. The Germans, having no inkling of the impending economic miracle, saw their country lying in ruins, and the last thing they wanted was to be reminded of their crimes, while the Israelis refused to accept money as compensation for the murder of millions of their relatives—or for the physical or psychological wounds they had suffered. And then there was the misleading German word *Wiedergutmachung* (literally making good again)—as if the murdered could be brought back to life.

Since the reparations applied mainly to material goods, the first postwar relationships between people began as well, despite much resistance. The Israelis had to meet with German experts who were supposed to acquaint them with the arriving automobile parts, locomotives and ships. And among the "Yekkes," Jews from Germany who had remained linguistically and culturally attached to their former homeland, there were some who were willing to enter into a dialogue with these visitors. They are considered the true bridgebuilders of German-Israeli relations. Former German and Austrian citizens were also the first Israeli ambassadors to Bonn after the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1965. Even today, Germany is, incidentally, the only posting that an Israeli diplomat is allowed to refuse.

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But for most Israelis, the Nazi past was not the greatest obstacle to contacts with Germans in those days, says former Israeli ambassador Avi Primor, but rather how they dealt with it in the present. “The Germans concealed their identity, not wanting to confront the past. Nobody wanted to engage in dialogue with hypocrites who pretended they had not known what was going on.”

Today, every German politician who visits Israel expresses his or her shame over the mass murder. Responsibility for the Shoah is “part of German identity,” as Federal President Horst Köhler put it during his 2005 visit to Israel. Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU), for her part, spoke in her historic speech of March 18, 2008 in the Knesset—in German—of Germany’s “special historical responsibility” for the security of Israel, which would “never be up for negotiation” and had become part of her country’s “reason of state.” In June of that year the president and his representatives had been greeted with military honors outside the Knesset in Jerusalem. When Norbert Lammert (CDU) then spoke in the plenary session, also in German and framed by sentences in Hebrew, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and President Reuven Rivlin were present. Lammert even received applause for his biblical linguistic efforts. Together with his Israeli counterpart, Lammert signed an agreement about a parliamentary forum at which members of both parliaments would meet annually to discuss topics of current interest.

Israeli President Shimon Peres gave a speech in the Bundestag on January 27, 2010. He said the Kaddish prayer for the victims of the Shoah, also recalling his murdered grandfather in Poland, whom he had seen for the last time at the age of eleven. Peres stressed at the same time, however, that he was now standing before the “leaders and representatives of a different, democratic Germany.”

The more time goes by, the more important the memory of the Holocaust becomes in Israel. Thus since the early 1990s, the annual Holocaust commemoration day has had a central place in the consciousness of young Israelis, whatever their origins. Mizrahi Jews also identify with the history of the persecution of European Jews. But the increased interest of young people in the Holocaust is not accompanied by a stronger rejection of Germany. Unlike many Israelis of the older generations, they do not hesitate to buy German products, enthusiastically follow German football and listen to German music.

Ten years ago, “Tokio Hotel“ and “Rammstein“ suddenly became favorite bands. The German-Israeli DJ scene organizes joint parties via the Internet, and guest sets by German DJs in Israel and Israeli DJs in Germany are a common occurrence. In recent years many German films have been screened in Israeli theaters, and not just in niche programs. Hans Fallada’s novel *Every Man Dies Alone* hit the Israeli bestseller list in 2011 under the title *Alone in Berlin* and stayed there for an unusually long time.

The book’s heroes are anti-Nazis. Israelis nowadays are increasingly interested in the attitudes of Germans during the Third Reich, beyond Jewish issues. Part of this interest is curiosity to understand what happened on the other side, as well as a tendency, which also applies to other countries, to find a counterweight to the perpetrators, according to the historian Moshe Zimmermann. “Such figures make it possible to develop a normal relationship to Germans and begin a dialogue.“ Since this November, the German traveling exhibition “White Rose” has been shown in Israel for the first time.

The distance between Israel and Germany is four hours by airplane. This can be little when young people realize to their surprise how similar their lifestyles and tastes are. But it can also be an enormous difference when it comes to those lessons from the past that so strongly influence identities on both sides: For where in the face of Auschwitz Germans shout a universal “Never Again,” the Israelis are more specific: “This must never happen again to US.”

*Self-image:* Another non-synchronicity that has come to shape German-Israeli relations has to do with the general development of the two countries in the area of self-image. Israelis have long wielded the shield of a “highly self-confident national self-presentation” (the Israeli author Dan Bar-On), which is now going through a critical and painful process of reassessment. Germany, in contrast, can now celebrate its

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renewed strength as the most important economic and political power in Europe after undergoing a long period of international and internal criticism.

Young people have also changed. Youth exchanges once paved the way for the establishment of diplomatic relations. Adenauer had the Franco-German Youth Office in mind as a model. Today young Germans still volunteer to serve with *Aktion Sühnezeichen* (Action Reconciliation Service for Peace), which was also officially recognized as an alternative to compulsory military service when the latter still existed. Overall, however, it has become more difficult nowadays to convince Germans to participate in organized youth exchanges. The reasons for this are changes in living conditions and interests. Another factor is the multi-ethnic composition of German society: young people from an immigrant background are less interested in the Holocaust and visiting Israel. In the meantime, however, programs have also been set up for Israelis who want to do volunteer work in Germany.

Source: Gisela Dachs, “Der lange Weg zur Aussöhnung: 50 Jahre diplomatische Beziehungen zwischen Israel und Deutschland,” *Das Parlament*, nos. 50–51, December 7, 2015.

[https://www.das-parlament.de/2015/50\\_51/im\\_blickpunkt/-/398520](https://www.das-parlament.de/2015/50_51/im_blickpunkt/-/398520)

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